

Support Public Inquiry at 10 am Tuesday in Basildon Centre

DALE FARM FIGHTING BACK AFTER FAILED EVICTION BID

By Grattan Puxon

After a hugely expensive but futile bid to drive them out of Dale Farm, Tory-leader Tony Ball turned around last week and advised homeless Travellers to seek residence permits through proper channels.

Rising to this challenge, residents will put their case to a public inquiry on Tuesday (22 Nov) into the establishment of an alternate mobile-home park at nearby Laindon. They are also want brown-field land at Gardiners Lane for a second site.

Both locations belong to the Homes & Communities Agency, a Government quango which earlier offered them to Basildon for this purpose. Tony Ball turned down the offer.

While formal planning consent is sought for only a dozen permanent plots at Laindon, Travellers are requesting the go-ahead to set up 60 temporary pitches to meet immediate emergency needs as winter weather sets in.

No surprise that Ball rejected the Laindon development. However, the grounds for refusal, like much else, were bungled by the council. Basildon got the land area wrong and claimed the plan is subject to regulations which do not in fact apply to this site of under one hectare. As a result the appeal could be a walkover.

More than 50 properties have been destroyed on the Dale Farm estate. But the number of caravans is now higher than before the eviction. Residents are living alongside mud-filled craters, with no electricity supply. Many have taken refuge on legal plots. Newly arrived caravans are packed on the estate roads as families come for Christmas.

The cost to tax-payers of Basildon's botched policy of ethnic-cleansing is rising weekly. Initially, the bill for the police-led assault on the estate was put at £18m. Now a woebegone Tony Ball is besieged not only by fresh legal action and claims for compensation, but a demand for an apology from a British MEP.

Members of parliament from all parties are backing Essex MEP Richard Howitt's demand that Ball say sorry for the physical force used to eject

him when he attempted to speak to media about his opposition to the eviction.

In the words of Martin Schultz, German leader of the 185-member socialist group, this was a deliberate and sinister interference with freedom of speech. The European Parliament is protesting to the UK Government about it, adding to earlier Dale Farm-related interventions by the UN and Amnesty International.

With a test-case due in the High Court mid-December, it could be that Basildon will find itself ordered to build pitches for the Dale Farm homeless. All who qualified turned down council houses and are pressing instead for the 62 pitches the council was supposed to provide by 2011 under regional planning.

Illegal over-enforcement, a common enough practice when evicting Gypsies, is another major accusation faced by Tony Ball's administration. A High Court judge is likely shortly to be asked to review evidence that the council has breached an agreement limiting the scope of the clearance.

Scores of compensation claims are currently in preparation, ranging from a broken washing machine to serious personal injury. Some legal properties allegedly incurred massive damage. Finally the police face complaints over their unprecedented use of 50,000 volt barb-firing taser guns to break into the estate.